

VZCZCXRO2933
PP RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0028/01 0570739
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 260739Z FEB 09
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0974
INFO RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1056

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 CHIANG MAI 000028

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT PLS PASS EAP/PD, EAP/MLS, PRM, G/TIP, DRL
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HIGHLIGHTS U.S. "SOFT POWER" IN VISIT TO NORTHERN THAILAND

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Summary

1. (U) The Ambassador's February 17-20 visit to four northern provinces highlighted the array of "soft power" tools the USG brings to bear in its 175-year-old relationship with Thailand. After opening the visit by participating in the closing ceremony of the 28th annual Cobra Gold military exercise, a key theme of the remainder of the trip was the USG's emphasis on investing in people and protecting especially vulnerable populations. The Ambassador's visit to a refugee camp in Mae Hong Son highlighted how the over 150,000 Burmese refugees in Thailand benefit from USG programs providing health and education support as well as U.S. resettlement. The social protection theme was also the focus of the Ambassador and Mrs. John's participation in a ground-breaking ceremony to kick-off Habitat for Humanity's Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project, which will see 82 homes constructed in Chiang Mai in November. Mrs. John's separate visits to two private American-run centers for at-risk youth, mostly ethnic hill tribe minorities, also showed Americans' support for vulnerable populations. A second theme of the trip - promoting international understanding by underscoring the strength of U.S.-Thai relations at the people-to-people level - was addressed by the Ambassador's visit to Mae Hong Son Community College's Community Technology and Learning Center. The Center is a collaborative project between the Kenan Institute Asia, the Thai Education Ministry, and Microsoft's Unlimited Potential Program. In Sukhothai and Kamphaeng Phet, the Ambassador and Mrs. John visited the area's three UNESCO World Heritage Sites and met with local press to praise Thailand's cultural preservation efforts. Lastly, they visited the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences' Virology Research Unit, part of AFRIMS' 48-year scientific collaboration with the Thai military on tropical infectious disease research and development. End Summary.

Cobra Gold Concludes Successfully

2. (U) The Ambassador's initial activity in Chiang Mai emphasized long-standing U.S.-Thai mil-mil ties. He participated, with PACOM Commander Admiral Keating, in the Cobra Gold 2009 closing ceremony on February 17. This was the 28th annual Cobra Gold exercise and the latest in a continuing series of exercises designed to promote regional peace and security. More than 7,000 U.S. military personnel participated in the multi-national event, which not only enhanced U.S.-Thai relations, but also strengthened the bonds of friendship with

other countries in the region.

Investing in People: Protecting Vulnerable Populations

13. (U) The Ambassador and Mrs. John continued their four-day, four-province visit to northern Thailand on February 18, when they took part in a ground-breaking ceremony at the Chiang Mai build site of Habitat for Humanity's Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project, called "The Mekong Build 2009." Joined by the CG and his wife, local dignitaries, and Habitat officials, the Ambassador and Mrs. John helped break ground at the site where 82 homes will be constructed in November with the participation of President and Mrs. Carter. Media turn-out was high, with extensive local coverage in the north's two leading newspapers (combined circulation over 60,000) of the Ambassador's remarks about his family's personal involvement in Habitat projects (his daughter was at a Habitat build site in northeastern Thailand that week) and the American people's interest in helping the underprivileged around the world.

14. (U) The previous day, Mrs. John paid visits to two centers for at-risk youth, mostly ethnic hill tribe minorities, that are run by private Americans. The Ponsawan Child Development Center, founded and run by an American couple from Oklahoma, has 70 students who are taught to read and speak Thai so they may enter a nearby Thai public school at the first-grade level. The Center's students and boarders are poor tribal migrant children whose parents have come to the city in search of work, mainly as day laborers or hawkers of flowers and trinkets. The goal is to integrate the children (some of whom are AIDS orphans) into Thai society by providing basic education, life skills, and assistance in obtaining documentation needed for registration, education, and in some cases Thai citizenship.

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15. (U) Mrs. John also made a return visit to Chiang Mai's New Life Center, which provides educational and therapeutic services to young women who are victims of or at risk of human trafficking. She had previously visited the Center in January 2008, and visited the Center's Chiang Rai shelter last May as well, where she subsequently donated books provided by the Asia Foundation. The New Life Center, founded and run by American Baptist missionaries, is active in urging Thailand to implement anti-trafficking laws, improve protection for victims, and report suspected cases. The Center works with Thai social workers and government officials to obtain residency documents for many of its boarders and teach them essential life skills. Mrs. John joined the girls in making handicrafts while answering questions about herself and discussing general life issues. She also spoke one-on-one with a recently arrived 14-year-old resident, who spoke of how family poverty drove her to work in a local bar so that she could help pay for food for her two younger siblings.

USG Supports, Resettles Burmese Refugees

16. (SBU) The Ambassador and Mrs. John, accompanied by CG and additional Mission staff, arrived in Mae Hong Son February 18. They spent the ensuing 24 hours focusing on USG humanitarian efforts along the Thai-Burma border to address the health, education, personal safety, and advocacy needs of the more than 150,000 Burmese refugees who have fled repressive rule in their home country and taken shelter in Thailand. Over lunch with the Governor and his senior staff, the Ambassador raised the issue of the four camps located in Mae Hong Son province. He noted the strain this 45,000-strong population places on provincial resources, and thanked the Governor for his cooperation as a willing host to the refugees. The Ambassador also asked about the effectiveness of border controls in the area, and heard from the Governor about the structured relationship with his

counterparts in the three Burmese states that border Mae Hong Son (Shan, Karen, and Karenni states).

¶7. (U) Thereafter the Ambassador drove 15 miles (a nearly one-hour trip over mostly rough dirt track) to the Ban Mae Nai Soi refugee camp, located in a remote hilly forest about a mile from the Burmese border. The camp, which houses more than 18,000 registered refugees (nearly all ethnic Karenni), is the largest in the province and the second-largest in Thailand. The Ambassador and Mrs. John were cheerfully greeted by over a hundred young refugees, many holding hand-made signs proclaiming "We Love Obama" and "Take Us To America." They then met with Camp Committee members (elected refugee leaders) and a group of several dozen camp students. In the ensuing free-form discussion, the students spoke of their desire to resettle in the U.S., and the Ambassador emphasized the importance of English language skills. He and his wife donated books, toys and personal supplies that had been collected by the staff and families of Consulate Chiang Mai. They then visited the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) cultural orientation program center, which provides hands-on classroom training for refugees on basic knowledge needed to understand their journey to the U.S. and life in America.

¶8. (SBU) Adjacent to the camp is a small village of so-called "Long-neck Karenni," or ethnic Padaung. The Padaung, whose women are renowned for the coiled brass rings worn around their necks, fled to Thailand from Burma in the last two decades and recently received approval from the RTG for third-country resettlement. At the village, the Ambassador and Mrs. John were briefed by International Rescue Committee (IRC) staff, who guided them through the village's USAID-funded health post. They also spoke informally with several villagers, who support themselves by receiving tourists interested in seeing their way of life and buying locally-made handicrafts. About one third of the villagers have opted to pursue resettlement and thus are relocating to Ban Mae Nai Soi camp to begin the process.

¶9. (SBU) The next stop was to observe on-going pre-screening and interviewing of the nearly 11,000 camp refugees whom UNHCR has referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Over 1,600 of these are now travel-ready and awaiting exit permits from the Interior Ministry; the first group of 27 people will depart the camp for the U.S. on February 25. The Ambassador and Mrs. John were briefed by Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) staff who conduct pre-screening of the refugees. The next step is conducted at the adjacent DHS/U.S. Customs and Immigration

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Service interview site, where the Ambassador briefly observed the adjudication process. DHS officers there are in the process of interviewing the first tranche of the 11,000-plus Ban Mae Nai Soi refugees who have been referred by UNHCR and have expressed interest in being considered for resettlement in the U.S. The majority of Burmese refugees expected to resettle in the U.S. in FY09 will come from this camp. The following day the Ambassador toured the Mae Hong Son provincial hospital, where State's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) has partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and IOM in setting up and operating a state-of-the-art facility for the pre-admission medical screening of U.S.-accepted refugees.

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador met on February 19 with UNHCR and NGO officials who provide humanitarian services in the refugee camps. This included the IRC, which runs assistance projects (health and gender-based violence) funded by PRM, provides USAID-funded capacity-building grants to local NGOs in the area, and collaborates in a USAID-funded migrant workers' health outreach program with the Thai Ministry of Public Health. Another participant in the briefing was the Thai-Burma Border Consortium, which receives PRM funding to provide food and other basic supplies to refugees living in all four camps in Mae Hong Son province. A primary focus of the discussion was the effect of U.S. resettlement on local NGO service providers - as resettlement picks up speed, most of the best NGO-trained medics and teachers decide to depart for new lives in the U.S. Another

topic was the desirability of moving the residents of the smaller, more remote Ban Mae Surin camp to the larger, more accessible Ban Mae Nai Soi camp to permit processing for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Our interlocutors cited economies of scale in providing services, and some concerns over domestic violence in the isolated Ban Mae Surin camp, as reasons for the move. The Ambassador undertook to raise this issue with appropriate officials in Bangkok, to supplement the Embassy's ongoing efforts with RTG officials on this issue.

¶11. (SBU) The briefers, noting that well over 90% of the Ban Mae Nai Soi refugees who seek resettlement are bound for the U.S., praised the USG as "uniquely" open in receiving refugees and imposing few restrictions in terms of health, education, language and family reunification requirements. They also welcomed recent progress by Mae Hong Son officials to reduce a backlog in registration of recently arrived refugees by its Provincial Admissions Board (from 8,000 pending adjudications last summer to about 5,000 as of early this year). Regarding the well-being of those refugees who elect not to resettle (about half the population of Ban Mae Nai Soi), the briefers spoke of the need to bolster their self-sufficiency and quality of life by expanding their freedom of movement and granting them the right to employment outside the camps.

Investing in People: Education

¶12. (U) Prior to departing Mae Hong Son, the Ambassador and Mrs. John visited the province's Community College, to underscore the Mission's commitment to strengthening U.S.-Thai relations among youth. The College President received them at the school's Community Technology and Learning Center. The Center is one of four pilot locations in Thailand developed in collaboration between the Kenan Institute Asia and the RTG's Bureau of Community College Administration, with funding provided by the Microsoft Unlimited Potential Program. The program seeks to bridge the digital divide and improve information technology capacity in under-served communities. The school spoke warmly of the support it received from USAID at its founding six years ago, and of its ongoing connections to Casper Community College in Wyoming. Last year the school established a Tai Yai (Shan) Study Center, aimed at documenting and displaying the culture, architecture, traditions, arts, and language of the ethnic Shan culture, which is richly represented in Mae Hong Son. Another current focus of the school is to build up the materials and curriculum offered via its USAID-funded self-access English language center, another partnership with the Kenan Institute Asia.

Celebrating Thailand's Rich Cultural Heritage

¶13. (U) On February 19-20 the Ambassador and Mrs. John travelled with CG and Consulate staff to the lower north provinces of Sukhothai and Kamphaeng Phet, the seat of the first

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great Thai kingdom in the 13th and 14th centuries. There they visited the area's three UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which preserve the stunning architectural glory of ancient Siam, and met with local electronic and print media to praise Thailand's cultural preservation efforts. Coverage of the visits was also carried by the National News Bureau.

Economic Downturn Worries

¶14. (SBU) During courtesy calls in both of these lower north "rice bowl" provinces, the governors said they did not yet have a clear picture of the local impact of the global economic slowdown, but were evaluating potential effects carefully. The Kamphaeng Phet governor said agriculture - the province's

leading sector - was beginning to face falling prices due to sluggish world demand. Local farmers would soon feel the impact as their incomes dropped; however, the RTG's 2,000 baht (57 USD) economic stimulus payment to laborers earning under 15,000 baht (430 USD) per month would help lessen the blow. The economic crisis has also pushed down sales of the Chang beer company, whose Kamphaeng Phet factory is its largest in Asia. Chang's shrinking sales revenues have caused the company to delay its planned ethanol project investment in the province.

¶15. (SBU) In Sukhothai, dependent primarily on tourism and agriculture, the governor said he was conducting a survey to evaluate the effect of the economic crisis on local unemployment. The province also planned to implement RTG stimulus policies, including cash payments to laborers, agricultural price guarantees, and school subsidies. Another area of concern was water management. Sukhothai's Yom River is the only northern Thai river without a dam, leaving the province vulnerable to both flooding and droughts. To address this, the province plans a flood control/water management system that will cost USD 142 million.

Investing in People: Health Cooperation

¶16. (U) Wrapping up their four-day visit to the north, the Ambassador and Mrs. John met with and were briefed by staff at the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences' (AFRIMS) Virology Research Unit, which is co-located with Kamphaeng Phet Provincial Hospital. For over 48 years, AFRIMS - a joint scientific collaboration between the U.S. and Royal Thai armies - has been a benchmark of success in tropical infectious disease research and vaccine development. The Kamphaeng Phet field site has been active for over 20 years in infectious diseases surveillance and vaccine development. Early efforts led to the successful conduct of two phase III vaccine trials (Japanese encephalitis and hepatitis A), with over 100,000 volunteer participants. Both trials resulted in product licensure and helped shape Thailand's current national vaccination strategy. Research initiatives since the mid-1990s have focused primarily on dengue and influenza disease surveillance. AFRIMS' Kamphaeng Phet field site is currently readying for prospective investigations of influenza transmission, and is under consideration as a future dengue vaccine phase III trial site.

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